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Reflections on a vision for school leadership

Abstract

When I reflect upon my vision for leading a school, I see a holistic nature to the areas of climate, shared decision making, community collaboration, and educational programming. These areas overlap one another as they provide the foundation on which I will lead. Community collaboration involves shared decision making, and shared decision making impacts climate. Educational programming, as I have described it, involves all of these areas. I feel what connects everything are the principles of relationships, resources, and relevancy. I believe the keys to success as a leader will be dependent upon the ability to create and nurture relationships, identify and utilize resources, and establish and maintain relevancy in what we do as a school.

REFLECTIONS ON A VISION FOR SCHOOL LEADERSHIP

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Master of Arts in Education

by

Thomas J. Neuhaus

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The Class of 2000 began high school this past Fall. They will have graduated as we begin a new century - a new millennium. During a pep assembly at the beginning of this school year, I heard this class, for the first time as high school students, chant their year of graduation during an all class cheer. When I heard them shout the year 2000 it caused me to pause and reflect on my career as an educator. I began to think about my past, and the forces that influenced my personal and professional development. I thought about where I have been, what I have learned, what I am now, and what I want to become. I began to reflect upon the values and beliefs that guide me in my life. I thought about my future as a school administrator and the vision I have for leading a school.

It seemed not long ago, when I was relatively new to the education profession, that the Class of 2000 entered kindergarten in a small rural school in northwest Illinois. I was a K-12 counselor and teacher at that time, beginning my fourth year as an educator. The year was 1987. Four years had passed since the National Commission on Excellence in

Education presented their report, *A Nation At Risk* (1983). I recall how that report was described as a clarion call for change in the American public education system (Parnell, 1985). It was heralded as a groundbreaking document that would give rise to reform measures that would improve our nation's schools. Goals were developed targeting the Class of 2000. New standards for educational excellence were set, and programs were to be implemented that would develop students who would regain the number one academic ranking in the world. Change appeared imminent. It seemed like an exciting time to be an educator.

Unfortunately, it didn't take very long before I became quite skeptical of the Commission's report, and somewhat pessimistic about some of the responses by the educational community. The outgrowth of reform programs appeared cosmetic at best. They also seemed more reactionary than progressive. Although our world was rapidly changing, some educational leaders appeared poised to recreate the past. It didn't seem logical that increase graduation requirements,

extended class time, tougher discipline standards, and increased college admission requirements would be the answers to the challenges we faced in education. There seemed to be more substantive issues to confront than getting "back to the basics". However, being relatively new to the education profession, I did not have a clear vision for school reform. I believed schools needed to make some fundamental change, but was not sure exactly what was needed, or how it could be done. It appeared to me that schools might improve by making change in the areas of curriculum, assessment, teaching methodology, and staff development. I also thought that teachers needed to become more involved in the process of leading schools. It seemed like some of the layers of bureaucracy needed to be peeled away from schools, and with them some of the traditional practices of the past.

Thirteen years have passed since the publication of the report, *A Nation at Risk* (1983). I am now two jobs (and nine years) removed from the small rural school in Northwest Illinois. A great deal has changed in our world since 1983, but

little has changed in the field of education. Although some improvements in education have been made, the product or outcomes are much the same. The way we educated the Class of 2000 is essentially the same as the way we educated the generation before. In my opinion, *A Nation at Risk* (1983) fell woefully short of its intended purpose. Although the report probably opened dialogue about critical issues in education, it may have done as much harm as good in terms of the impact it has had on American public education. There has not been a great reformation in our nation's schools. The dreams of a "world class" education for the Class of 2000 have gone unfulfilled. In addition, society has undergone rapid social, economic, and technological change, just as Naisbitt and Aburdene (1990) predicted. Teen pregnancy has increased, the national high school drop-out rate has risen, and the socioeconomic gap between the "haves" and "have nots" in our society has widened. Violence in our homes, on our streets, and in our schools has become more common. Gang activity has

multiplied. Furthermore Parnell's (1985) prediction of a shortage of skilled technicians to meet the demands of more sophisticated jobs is coming to pass. The perception that public education is failing our youth has increased. I believe the time has come for educational leaders to answer this challenge.

During the past thirteen years (as a teacher, counselor, coach, and graduate student) I have seen, heard, experienced, and learned a great deal about the American public education system. I have watched educational initiatives come and go, and listened to educational leaders spew the rhetoric of school reform. I have witnessed the "politics of education" from the federal to the local level. I have seen the effects that organizations, such as testing companies, special interest groups, and educational vendors have had on public schools, as they have vied for monetary or influential gain. I have experienced the ineffectiveness of externally imposed mandates that have not been internally embraced. I have come to believe that all too often decisions about schools or

educational programs are made by people who are too far removed from the issues. I have come to understand that change and improvement in schools must come from within -- it must come from the people who are most closely involved in the process -- teachers, students, staff, parents, and administrators. I have also realized that school leaders (superintendents, principals, etc.) have the ultimate power and influence to create a collaborative culture that is open to change. I believe this type of culture is currently an exception in our public schools.

My vision for leading a school has staff empowerment and collaboration as its centerpiece. I agree with Bonsting's (1992) assertion that the development of a collaborative approach will give rise to a sense of ownership that is essential to any successful organization. I see a school that is shaped by the professionals on the inside, rather than by the forces on the outside. I see a school that is student centered and serves the unique needs of the community. I see a school that shares the responsibility for shaping youth with the

community, but takes a leadership role in the development of collaborative programs. When I look to the future, I see myself leading a school that continues to evolve in the process of change.

The school I would lead into the 21st century would be organized around four themes: (a) school climate, (b) shared-decision making, (c) educational programming, and (d) community collaboration. The development of these areas would provide the foundation for change.

School Climate

I believe that a school, like a person, develops a personality that can be felt. This is commonly referred to as climate. It is the characteristics, or qualities that give life to the institution. It is reflected in the physical plant, curriculum, policies, procedures, programs, methods of communication, teaching strategies, and personal interaction. It impacts all aspects of the organization. A school's climate is a very powerful force that has a profound impact on the feelings, thoughts, and actions of its people. As a school

leader, I would have a significant impact on the type of climate that develops. I would devote much attention to the creation of a positive and supportive student-centered environment. I would work to create a school that values learning, improvement, and achievement. It would be a school that provides people with the opportunity to fulfill personal needs, as well as contribute to the achievement of shared goals. It would be safe, clean, friendly, caring, flexible, creative, cooperative, energetic, and open to change. People would trust one another, communicate well, be able to take risks, and work as a team.

I believe the key to creating a positive and supportive climate in a school is to provide opportunities for people to fulfill their fundamental needs. Glasser identified four of these needs as belongingness, power, fun, and freedom. These needs provide the framework for Glasser's control theory of human behavior (cited in Gough, 1987). I like Glasser's theory and would work to develop a program that would provide staff and students opportunities to understand it, and apply it to

make our school a better place. I envision this to be a long-term and continuous program that becomes a central part of our curriculum and staff development offerings. One example of the application of this theory would be represented in the training of staff in public relations (registering new students, building tours, telephone skills, etc.). First impressions are very important in creating an atmosphere that makes people feel they are welcome, or belong. This would also be evident in programs for new students, such as a "host program", where a current student would be assigned to assist a new student for the first few days of school, and the local Parent Teacher Organization would make a personal contact welcoming the parents to the community. The need for power and freedom would be addressed through the shared decision making process, and the need for fun would be reflected in both curricular and co-curricular programs. The opportunities would be endless, and continually evolving.

I would also work to develop a student-centered environment. I believe that all students can learn, that success

breeds success, and that schools control the conditions of success (Spady, 1988). I would continually pose the question, how does this class, policy, procedure, or program impact student learning, behavior, and growth? The inservice programs, such as control theory, would reflect this. It would be evident that students are the focal point of every decision that is made in the school. I would also utilize a student advisory council to get ideas on how to improve our school. In additon, I would have student representation on our schools shared decision making committee. Our school would also have a comprehensive student service program to assist with social, emotional, personal, and educational issues. Our curriculum and teaching methodology would be designed to address specific learner outcomes. It would include corrective and enrichment opportunites. I would envision night school, intramural athletics, various clubs, as well as traditional interscholastic programs. As a school leader, I would also insure that the administrative policies that are developed are student-centered and interpreted in a manner that is

consistent with considering the unique individual needs of each student.

I believe that schools should become organizations that are dedicated to continuous improvement (Bonsting, 1992).

The climate of the school should reflect this through the practices of both students and staff. I would promote and recognize learning, improvement, and quality achievement. As mentioned previously, students would have the opportunity to participate in a multitude of academic and co-curricular activities. School assemblies and evening programs would be developed to recognize exceptional student and staff achievement or improvement in both of these areas. The local media would also be utilized to publicize "success stories". Student work would be displayed in the hallways and in the classrooms. In addition, I would work to promote community service organizations to sponsor awards for both students and staff who have achieved at a high level or who have shown great improvement. I believe all of these things would help to

promote a culture that values learning, improvement, and achievement.

However, I believe the most powerful influence on the development of climate in a school are the actions of the leader. As a leader, I would try to model the kind of behavior that I attempt to influence.

If I want people to trust me, and one another, I would act in a way to earn their trust. I would be consistent in my words and actions -- predictable within reason. I would be honest, open, fair, and supportive. I would clearly communicate my expectations, and provide people with direct feedback concerning their performance in our school. I would be genuine and exhibit high moral standards of conduct. This type of behavior creates a safe atmosphere of trust and respect (Pellicer, 1990). English (1992) referred to trust as the podium of leadership. I also believe that trust is an essential ingredient to the development of a culture that encourages risk taking and creativity.

If I want people to be energetic, I would lead with passion. I would use the opportunities of individual conferences, staff meetings, or school assemblies to communicate the mission of our school and keep people motivated and focused on moving closer to the realization of our goals. Wise (1992) stated that the energy of a successful organization comes from an optimistic and positive leader. If the school I lead is to shine brightly, it must be invigorated with excitement and energy. I believe my passion would be the fire that ignites the flame.

If I want people to be friendly and caring, I need to develop rapport with them and treat them as valued members of the school community. I would always keep in mind that the needs of people come before the development of things (Covey, 1994). I would make time to be visible and accessible to staff and students. I would take time to listen to them, and attempt to understand them. I would show patience with them and provide them with the assistance and time to learn and improve. I would also remember the power of humor, and take

time to smile and laugh. I believe many of these acts, added together, become immeasurable in developing a positive climate. A successful school leader has a true appreciation for those many small, but genuine acts that communicate direction and encourage support (Tratner, 1992). By focusing on people first, I would influence the development of a positive climate that would give rise to a school that works together to learn, improve, and achieve.

Shared Decision Making

I am convinced that the only way to develop a school that truly acts on a collective vision and common mission is through sharing the power and responsibility to lead. As a school leader, I would follow Sergiovanni's (1990) advice and give up power, to gain power. I would provide school staff with the authority, time, and resources to develop and implement programs that are consistent with the mission and goals of our school. Opportunities would be made available for people to contribute their unique talents for the good of the school. I would invite students, staff (all school

employees), and fellow administrators to work together to bring about the realization of shared goals. I believe this opportunity to contribute would result in an increased sense of ownership and commitment to the school (Fullan, 1992).

Leithwood (1992) described this as creating a collaborative culture. People would be more productive, and feel more fulfilled. They would have a better understanding of the "big picture", and become more supportive of school policies, procedures, and programs. I believe the process of shared decision making may contribute as much to a school as the actual programs or policies that result from the decisions made.

I believe there is a strong relationship between creating a collaborative culture through shared decision making, and influencing the development of a positive school climate. It is difficult to separate the two. I feel utilizing shared decision making enhances the school climate, and a positive school climate can bring about a more effective shared decision making process. The common theme to both of these areas is

creating a school that works together to promote the realization of both individual and group needs.

I would develop the shared decision making process by involving all people who have a vested interest in the school. This would include students, teachers, support staff, administrators, parents, community agencies, local post-secondary educational institutions, and businesses. The type or level of shared decision making involvement would depend on the following criteria: (a) What type of role (direct or indirect) does the group assume for influencing student behavior, learning, and achievement? (b) What responsibility does the group have for student behavior, learning, and achievement? and c) What type of knowledge and ability does the group have about human development/behavior, teaching, learning, and the administration of a school? In general, the more direct the role, the higher the level of responsibility, and the greater the knowledge and ability in the field of education, the more influence the group will have in the decision making process. There would be flexibility in the system to allow for

exceptions to the process when issues arise that may benefit from "expert" advice. As Chanley, McFarlane, and Caprio (1992) indicated, a successful school leader must organize a system where information is shared, and responsibility is delegated. I see delegation as the sharing of power. I believe by sharing power as a leader, I will meet a vital need of individuals and groups, that will influence them to become more committed and supportive of our school.

I would envision a shared decision making team that would include a core group of approximately nine to twelve members (depending on the size of the school), and various consultation teams of three to five members. The core team would be composed of approximately seven teachers, two parents, two students, and one associate principal. I would attend only when the team feels a need for my input, or I feel they may need my direction. The consultation teams would represent students, parents, secretarial staff, food service technicians, maintenance personnel, bus drivers, local post-secondary educational institutions, community agencies, and

businesses. I would be a member on each of these teams. The consultation teams would be combined when prudent, and would also work as an ad-hoc team with the core group when the situation calls for it. The idea would be to design a system that would allow for interested groups to become involved in the local school. Team membership would be decided by nominations within the specific groups (teachers would nominate teachers, etc.) along with a person's willingness to serve. I would act as a liaison to the central office, and the board of education.

Despite the many benefits of sharing power, I believe some decisions should not be shared. When necessary, I would give direction in the decision making process, or arbitrarily take command of the situation -- particularly if I felt the decision was not aligned with our beliefs, mission, or goals. There are times a leader must act suddenly and with boldness to defend the principles for which the school stands (English, 1992). I believe these situations would necessitate acting with courage. I feel Machiavelli summed up this idea in his

work *The Prince* when he wrote, "When in doubt, lead" (cited by Pellicer, 1990, p. 15). I plan to lead in a manner that influences the development of a culture where shared decision making becomes the norm.

Educational Programming

The educational programming components that I would emphasize as a school leader are staff and student development. Staff development would focus on the design and implementation of opportunities for staff to learn and improve as individuals, and as members of the school community.

Student development would focus on the design and implementation of opportunities for students to learn and improve as individuals, and as members of the school community. A common area of study for both staff and students would be control theory and the basic human needs described by Glasser (cited in Gough, 1987). All programs would be based on the best available research and practice on what works in education. Staff and student development programming would be consistent with each other and aligned

with school beliefs, mission, and goals. There would be clearly defined outcomes that state what knowledge and competencies should be demonstrated upon completion of a course. There would be corrective and enrichment opportunities, with the expectation that all learners would master the information presented, and be able to apply it (Vickery, 1990). I believe all people do not learn at the same pace, and that an effective school takes this into account when developing educational programming. Time must be allotted to give people the opportunity to be successful. As Spady (1988) suggested, the clock and the calendar would be deemphasized. I would also utilize a criterion-referenced student assessment system that would be aligned with exit outcomes. Standardized tests would also be utilized for state and national comparisons. Both the student and staff development programs would be on-going systems open to improvement and change. I would lead in this area by providing staff the time, information, and resources to develop effective programs. I would also be responsible for insuring that our decisions are

data driven, consistent with best practice in the education profession, and aligned with our schools beliefs, mission, and goals.

Staff Development

I believe an effective staff development program begins with the creation of a common mission, along with shared beliefs and goals. This should be derived through a collaborative effort of the staff. I would provide time for the development of these areas if they do not already exist. The common mission, shared beliefs, and shared goals would become the foundation for what we do as a school. Strategic planning, curriculum development, instructional methods, student outcomes, school assessment, and organizational procedures would all be consistent with what we believe about effective teaching, learning, and administering in a school.

A major focus of the staff development component would be teacher improvement. I would utilize a peer coaching model, where staff would identify individuals they feel are exceptional teachers. These teachers would be trained as

instructional leaders, be assigned to a "teaching team", and coach the members of that group through an individualized teacher improvement process (Chalker, 1992). I would expect a free flowing dialogue to evolve about teaching methods and strategies, but a philosophical framework for teaching effectiveness would be emphasized. I would consult with the coaches and teachers on the individualized plan, and provide whatever evaluation is required by district policy. My level of involvement in the teacher improvement plan would directly correlate with the maturity level of the teacher. I believe, as a general rule, the more mature a teacher is, the less degree of leader involvement. The less mature a teacher is, the more degree of leader involvement (Hersey, Blanchard, & Natemeyer, 1979). I would work more directly with new teachers to the district, whether experienced or not, to provide more developmental and evaluative direction. Instructional coaches would be evaluated during their tenure in this position by a building administrator.

I envision a plethora of educational programs offered to our staff. Topics would be aligned with the school mission. Some examples would be the shared decision making process, effective communication, control theory, and team building skills. Staff members would have input into what is offered, and be utilized as presenters when appropriate. A professional library would be maintained for staff use. In addition, staff would have the opportunity to attend professional conferences and seminars outside of the local building. A summer program would be offered through our business partnerships that would provide teachers the opportunity to work for a local business in a position that is related to the subject area they teach. Teachers who participated in this program would inservice staff about their experience. The goal of the program would be to develop a connection between the classroom and the workplace.

I believe the staff development program in a school is at least as important as the student development program. The typical teacher works in a school for a large portion of their

life. They have a great impact on the students. The typical student is transient. They are part of the school for only a short time. Given this fact, it makes good sense to focus on staff development. I believe staff should be presented with the opportunity to learn, improve, and achieve so they can model this type of behavior for the students to emulate.

Student Development

The student development program would consist of both curricular and co-curricular activities. The type of academic, performance, recreational, and competitive opportunities offered would reflect the needs and wants of the student body, and the community. I strongly believe the co-curricular program of a school is almost as important as the curricular program. Student involvement in activities outside of the classroom would be encouraged. Although the importance of co-curricular activities is immeasurable, the focus of this section will be on the academic programs of the school.

I envision the curriculum being driven by specific, measureable outcomes developed through the shared decision

making process. Subject area teachers would be primarily responsible for the development of content outcomes, and for designing units of study that would promote the acquisition of knowledge and skill. Ideally, textbooks would only be used as a supplementary resource. Teachers would act as coaches, or facilitators, in promoting student learning. Students would be expected to demonstrate successful mastery of both specific knowledge and skill at the end of a unit or course. Time would be built in to account for the differences in learning rate. Students who were not successful in mastering a skill, would be provided corrective instruction. Different teaching methodologies would be utilized when necessary. Students who mastered a skill more easily would be provided with enrichment activities. These activities would range from applying knowledge and skill to a community service project, to tutoring a student who needs corrective instruction. Cooperative learning, higher order thinking skills, performance demonstrations, and portfolio development would characterize a classroom.

I envision a school that is open nearly all year, with summer and evening programs offered. Some programs would be articulated with the local community college or a university/college linked via the Iowa Communications Network or internet. Students who exhibit a high enough performance level in a high school course could also earn college credit. Parnell (1985) described a 2+2 program where the final two years of high school could be applied to certain types of post-secondary degrees. I would pursue the development of these types of programs. I would also make sure that accelerated and remedial programs were available so students could personalize their educational experience. However, inclusive classrooms would be more common than self-contained. I envision a high school where a four year program of study is not necessarily the norm.

Despite the individualized nature of the curriculum, there would still be some obvious consistency. One example of this would be an advisor-advisee program where students would be assigned to a teacher (ratio of about 15:1) who would

provide them with a closer personal connection to the school. Teachers would work with their advisees on a number of issues such as, adjusting to high school, educational planning, career decision making, and post-secondary planning. Meeting time would also be utilized to present students with much of the same information that staff learns through the staff development program (control theory, communication skills, and team building). A culture would be created that would encourage self-assessment, responsibility, and goal setting. I would lead a school where everyone strives to learn, improve, and achieve.

Community Collaboration

I believe the time has come for schools to literally open their doors to the community. I envision a school that invites people in, and ventures out. This school would develop connections with community organizations in an attempt to promote learning, improvement, and achievement. A spirit of cooperation would emerge and resources would be shared. There would be a connectedness and sense of common purpose.

Human service agencies, businesses, and post-secondary schools would develop relationships that are mutually beneficial. A shared sense of responsibility to each other would result.

I believe the development of a collaborative community begins with an invitation to become involved in the shared decision making process. Once organizations feel ownership with the school, collaborative opportunities will emerge. Businesses could offer job shadowing experiences, or sponsor a student club. Students could volunteer time to work on community service projects ranging from cleaning a local park, to working in a food pantry. Human service agencies could utilize office space in the school, and consequently, be more accessible to serve young people. Retired people could be involved in volunteer activities at the school, such as a mentoring "at risk" students. Businesses, post-secondary schools, and the local high school could articulate educational and experiential programs that lead to targeted employment. The possibilities are endless.

As a school leader, I would act in an advisory capacity to promote partnerships, and insure all programs are aligned with the school's mission. I would reach out to community organizations and invite them to become involved. I would also encourage our staff to go into the community and look for opportunities for students and themselves to learn. The idea of the entire community as a resource for learning would be promoted. As mentioned previously, teachers would have summer opportunities to work for local businesses in their specific subject area. The goal of this program would be to assist teachers in developing practical applications of academic knowledge, and further solidify the school to work connection. I believe this type of collaboration would result in a community that is supportive of its school, and a school that is supportive of its community.

Summary

When I reflect upon my vision for leading a school I see a holistic nature to the areas of climate, shared decision making, community collaboration, and educational

programming. These areas overlap one another as they provide the foundation on which I will lead. Community collaboration involves shared decision making, and shared decision making impacts climate. Educational programming, as I have described it, involves all of these areas. I feel what connects everything are the principles of relationships, resources, and relevancy. These principles describe how I will lead. I believe the keys to my success as a leader will be dependent upon my ability to create and nurture relationships, identify and utilize resources, and establish and maintain relevancy in what we do as a school.

I believe people are the heart of a school. Influencing a culture that promotes the establishment of meaningful, supportive, and mutually satisfying relationships is essential. As a leader, I have a significant responsibility for this. This theme is inherent in my vision for leadership. Covey (1994) described a successful organization as one that becomes a vehicle for relationship building. I agree with him. The development of climate, shared decision making, community

collaboration, or educational programming all depend on people working together.

Resources (within and outside of the school), particularly human resources, are also vital to the success of any school. Developing a system that is creative and effective in utilizing people is critical. By developing partnerships, utilizing staff expertise, and cultivating volunteers, a school will be more successful in realizing its mission. As a school leader, I must continually look for ways to use the talent and resources that surround me.

The principle of relevancy is utilized much like a compass and map. As a school leader I have a major responsibility to help us stay on course. This is done by charting the course, and then insuring our movements bring us closer to our destination. I believe the journey is never ending, and navigating through the changing waters, becomes the challenge of leadership. I plan on enjoying the trip.

As a future school leader, I hope to keep this vision alive in me. I hope it proves to be more reality than rhetoric.

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